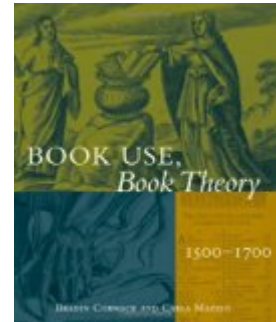


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bradin Cormack, Carla Mazzio. *Book Use, Book Theory: 1500-1700*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xi + 124 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-943056-34-0.

Reviewed by Susan R. Boettcher (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)
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The Minutiae of Book Use

This slim, richly illustrated volume is the accompanying catalogue to an exhibition held at the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library from March 8-June 17, 2005. I was not privileged to visit this exhibit, so unfortunately I cannot comment on the value of the book in its function as an accurate catalogue of that event. The somewhat lengthy introductory essay by the authors (37 pp.) locates the idea of using books in scholarly questions about reading as an activity in early modern Europe, particularly as the action of reading related to the construction and organization of the books as objects. It argues that the use of books is an act that places the reader in a social realm by connecting the book as an object with the secret spaces of the reader's mind and spirit—so that the internal aspects of book use are simultaneously related to its practical, material construction. This essay sets the tone for the volume, which considers such features of books as the marks readers placed in them, their size, organization, illustration, layout, and apparatus. Several brief sections are devoted to the book as an organizer of knowledge and thus thinking, as well as to the role of books as advice manuals and instruction manuals for various human activities both abstract and concrete.

The wide variety of intellectual and social activities tied to the books makes it somewhat surprising that the item descriptions concentrate primarily on the micro-contexts of the individual titles exhibited—the most narrow possible reading of their significance in the scholarly literature—rather than considering their connection with the theses expounded in major works on book use

and its significance. One thinks here of Adrian Johns's *The Nature of the Book* (1998), which argued that movable type printing did not lead to an improved or reliable construction of knowledge until particular associations of printers banded together to guarantee the authority of their product. The authors touch upon Johns's arguments only very tangentially, and cite his scholarly opponent Elizabeth Eisenstein in support of a subsequent point without referring to the serious disagreements between these scholars. Similarly, in the section on advice manuals, which stresses the place of such books as a way for the reader to engage the social world, no response is made to Rudolph Bell's more broadly oriented *How To Do It* (1999), which argued that advice manuals gave authorities an entry into the hidden areas of private life.

Because the book intersects only implicitly with many of the major themes in contemporary scholarly debates about the uses of books and printing, it will be of interest primarily to scholars concerned with the genres of the particular books discussed (mostly advice manuals, maps, anatomical or general references) or with the specific books themselves (which are drawn from the highlights of the University of Chicago's Special Collections Department). The exhibition apparently addressed mostly books written in English, French, Italian, and Latin, so that the specific context with which H-HRE readers are most familiar is present primarily as an absence. The book is an attractive and affordable object, however, and would be an excellent gift for bibliophiles and connoisseurs of early printing, as well as aficionados of the University of Chicago's rare book collection.

Its individual sections, in their detail and explanation of construction, would also provide a concise introduction to some of the counter-intuitive features of early book construction, would also provide a concise introduction to the theme of book usage for the educated general reader.

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